

Washington: Liquor prices didn't drop? That shouldn't be a surprise

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Many shoppers checking out the prices of liquor stocked at supermarkets and other outlets seem to be confused. They don't understand why they're paying at least as much for most items as before privatization took effect on Friday and, in some cases, more.

Presumably at least some of those shoppers helped pass Initiative 1183 last November to privatize liquor sales. Even though that initiative was written and promoted at high cost by Costco - which spent more than \$22 million getting it passed - many folks seem to think the higher costs were imposed by "the state" or "the Legislature," even "the governor."

No, the voters are responsible for those higher costs. That's what they voted for when they marked "yes" on I-1183.

Preserving revenue that allows the state and local government to enforce liquor laws at thousands of new points of sale was written into I-1183 in order to get voter support.

Earlier privatization efforts failed in large part because they would have stripped away public safety funding and so were bitterly fought by law enforcement and local governments.

Many responsible for public safety still opposed I-1183 because they recognized the inherent danger in thousands of new outlets selling hard liquor, virtually around the clock. But others, seeing that their funding would not be cut, either stayed silent or were supportive of the ballot measure.

Not helping matters is the labeling used by stores that sell liquor. They show the before-tax price and the price "that includes state taxes," not "that includes taxes preserved by voter-approved I-1183 as well as this store's profit."

Shoppers upset that they're not getting the cheap booze they thought they were voting for were not paying attention. Opponents of I-1183 pointed out that higher prices were the inevitable result of preserving public safety funding plus making a profit for private sellers.

Now there's talk of another initiative to strip away the liquor taxes. That would create the perfect storm: Cheap, readily accessible liquor with little funding for enforcing violations and dealing with the aftermath of more drunk driving, underage drinking and deadly accidents.

Approving that would only be compounding the mistake voters made when they voted for I-1183.